EGYPTIAN ART *Selected Writings of Bernard V. Bothmer*



Egyptian Art

SELECTED WRITINGS OF BERNARD V. BOTHMER

EDITED BY MADELEINE E. CODY

WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF PAUL EDMUND STANWICK

AND MARSHA HILL

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
2004

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford New York
Auckland Bangkok Buenos Aires Cape Town Chennai
Dar es Salaam Delhi Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi Kolkata
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi
São Paulo Shanghai Taipei Tokyo Toronto

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

Cover designed by Massimo Vignelli.

Cover photo by Dean Brown, Chief Photographer, Brooklyn Museum of Art.
Cover image, courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum of Art:
55.175
Head of Wesir-wer, Priest of the God Montu
Dynasty XXX
Egypt, Karnak
Green basalt
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Frontispiece courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum of Art: 58.30. *The Brooklyn Black Head.*
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Width: 28.5 cm.; Greatest depth: 35.2 cm.
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Document digital scanning and collating by DigiFilm Services, Inc.
under the direction and supervision of Allen Wechter.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Bothmer, Bernard V., 1912–
Egyptian art : selected writings of Bernard V. Bothmer / edited by Madeleine E. Cody,
with the assistance of Paul Stanwick and Marsha Hill.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-19-513071-5
1. Art, Egyptian. 2. Art, Ancient—Egypt. I. Cody, Madeleine E.
II. Stanwick, Paul Edmund. III. Hill, Marsha, 1949– IV. Title.
N5350 .B665 2003
732'.8—dc21 2003048696



1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in Hong Kong
on acid-free paper

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CHAPTER 25

ON REALISM IN EGYPTIAN FUNERARY SCULPTURE OF THE OLD KINGDOM



First published in *Expedition* 24/2 (Winter 1982), pp. 27–39.

FIG. 25.1 *(preceding page).* Idealizing statue of Nesekha, a royal priest. Dynasty V, 2350 B.C. Cairo no. CG 23. Porter, Moss, Málek, p. 723.

AMONG THE MAJOR arts associated with the funerary cults of ancient Egypt—sculpture, relief and painting—none gives us a deeper understanding of the inner personality of the Nile dwellers in antiquity than sculpture in the round. Like man himself, it is three-dimensional and thus encompasses the human measure—the essence of his humanity, tangibly, in a durable material, on a human scale.

The vast amount of information we can gain from the study of, literally, acres of wall decorations depicting life and death in ancient Egypt for nearly three thousand years, is nevertheless insufficient with regard to character and personality of the ancient Egyptian. His sufferings are rarely shown, the depth of human experience never. The literature of hieroglyphic and hieratic texts gives far more insight into man's nature, but the material is uneven and does not fully cover the thirty centuries of Egypt's experience with equal fidelity. If one wants to explore man's humanity in ancient Egypt nothing is more helpful than the human form the Egyptian created for eternity in his statuary.

Following the dictates of their funerary beliefs the Egyptians produced, for millennia, thousands of sculptures representing human beings, singly or in groups. They were meant to be set up, often inaccessibly, in the closed statue chambers of tombs, or in temples visible to all those who had access to the sanctuaries of the gods which dotted the land from the Mediterranean to the Sudan in ancient times. Thus at least a fair portion of the products of the sculptors' studios was on view for a long time, probably for centuries. This is well attested by the number of sculptures which were usurped, or provided with additional inscriptions, long after the people who had commissioned them were deceased.

When one considers the basic classifications applied today to ancient Egyptian statuary, the terms "naturalistic" and "idealizing"are frequently employed, one being the imitation of natural forms, the other the reproduction of an ideal aspect of the human figure. In the course of its long history Egypt produced a large number of funerary statues, both naturalistic and idealizing (Fig. 25.1), reflecting the hope for an enjoyable existence in the afterlife, with a youthful body of harmonious proportions and natural beauty, the features unlined but pleasant and full of vigor. As these qualities are amply represented in the many mortuary figures of the Nile Valley they may be considered typical. But how typical are they in reality?

It is characteristic of the human eye and mind to form instant associations for a given period of history, a geographical area, an art, a people, with certain elements, features or aspects, considered typical. They constitute a kind of framework into which other associations relating to the same topic easily fit. Egypt is not excepted, and thus certain

salient points of art and architecture are brought up repeatedly as if no other element, equally typical, existed.

Thus one sees forever pictures of the massive Giza Pyramids, but only rarely the graceful columns of the Zoser Temple at Saqqara. Documentary films always seem to feature Tutankhamen and Ramesses II and never such outstanding personalities as Sesostris III or Tuthmosis III. The same holds true for the depiction of Egyptian statuary.

Yet there are many works of sculpture which are not idealizing, and not beautiful in the accepted sense. They are naturalistic, in that they render conditions which the Egyptians observed in nature, or even realistic, which means an enhancement of the features of reality, but they are not as immediately appealing as so many of the idealizing Egyptian figures; they do not appear to be typical.

These non-idealizing features of Egyptian art are of interest because, far more than bland idealization, they mirror the attitude of the ancient Egyptian toward life, death and the human experience. When one studies Egyptian statuary from this point of view, a surprisingly large number of sculptures come to light which show the direct opposite of the standard likeness of the youthful-looking man, represented as well fed, bright-eyed and sometimes even smiling in anticipation of the paradise hereafter.

Faces with non-idealizing features, however, should not be called portraits. They may have been created while the patron who had commissioned a tomb or temple statue was still alive and thus, presumably, could have served as model to the artisan who made the statue. But in order to qualify as a portrait in the strict sense of the word, the likeness must render the total personality of the man represented, his outer and inner qualities of body, mind, heart and soul—and very few ancient Egyptian sculptures fulfill those requirements.

There are, however, traits of realism which an artisan knew from his own experience or from hearsay, or which he copied directly from life and eventually imparted to the statues he was making. He pictured physical deficiencies in sculpting a dwarf (Fig. 25.2) or a hunchback (Fig. 25.3). More often, however, he reproduced a facial expression which may, or may not, have been the reflection of a mood or a particular state of mind (Fig. 25.4).

Since there existed throughout the classical periods of Egypt's long history an undercurrent of articulate realism in sculpture in the round, it is important to investigate its origin and to find its first occurrence. The variety of expressions encountered in the formative stages of sculpture in Dynasties I and II and the absence of standardized idealization, which had not yet evolved, make it impossible to trace the beginning of expressed realism to before 2700 B.C.





FIG. 25.2. The dwarf Khnumhotep, overseer of linen. End of Dynasty V, 2300 B.C. Cairo no. CG 144. Porter, Moss, Málek, p. 722.

FIG. 25.3. The hunchback from the household of Mitry. Dynasty VI, 2250 B.C. Cairo no. JE 52081. Porter, Moss, Málek, p. 632.

With Dynasty III, however, the technical ability of the artisan, the greater number of works commissioned, and a highly intelligent, complex state of mind appear to have combined in producing the first set of statues encompassing both realism and idealization. Unfortunately, the statue head of King Zoser, the outstanding personality of the period, is too battered to permit an assessment as to its realism, or lack of it, but judging from other royal works made in his reign and shortly thereafter his face presumably reflected strength, dignity and the divine remoteness which is so characteristic of the king's likeness from the Old Kingdom on.

From Zoser's pyramid complex, however, come several heads of prisoners, presumably foreigners, now in the Cairo Museum, which form the earliest well preserved examples of a highly individualized style of sculpture (Figs. 25.5–25.7). Since they were excavated near the Step Pyramid, and theirs was not a secondary emplacement, they definitely date from the age of King Zoser (2650–2630 B.C.) and thus are the earliest in a long line of realistic representations embodying human suffering at the burial place of a king.

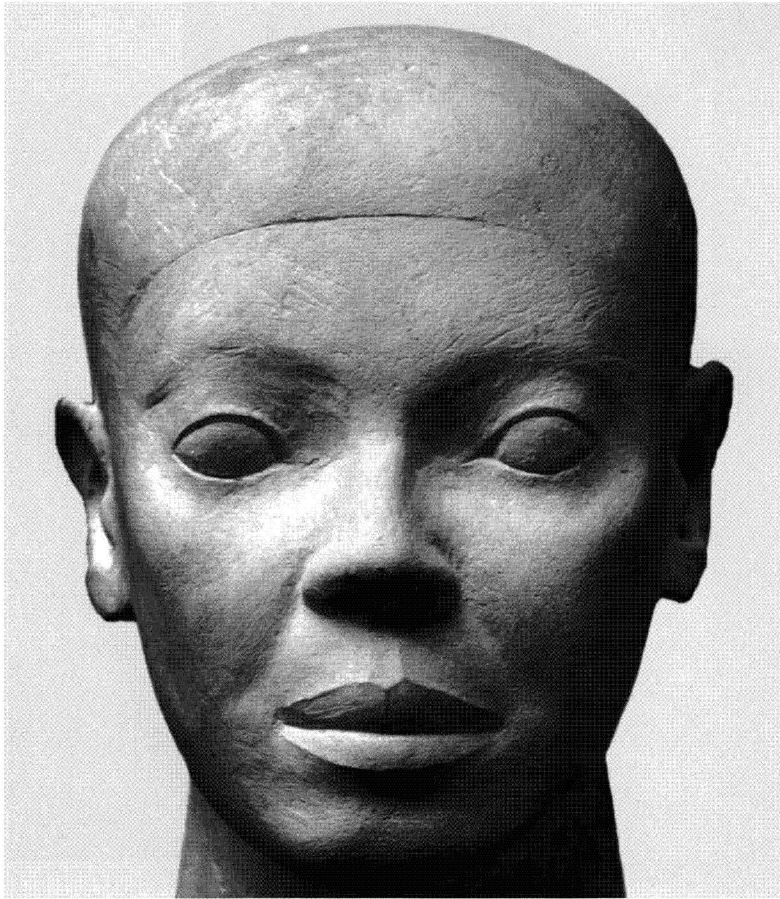


FIG. 25.4. A princess from Giza. Dynasty IV, 2500 B.C. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts no. 14.719. Porter, Moss, Málek, p. 128.

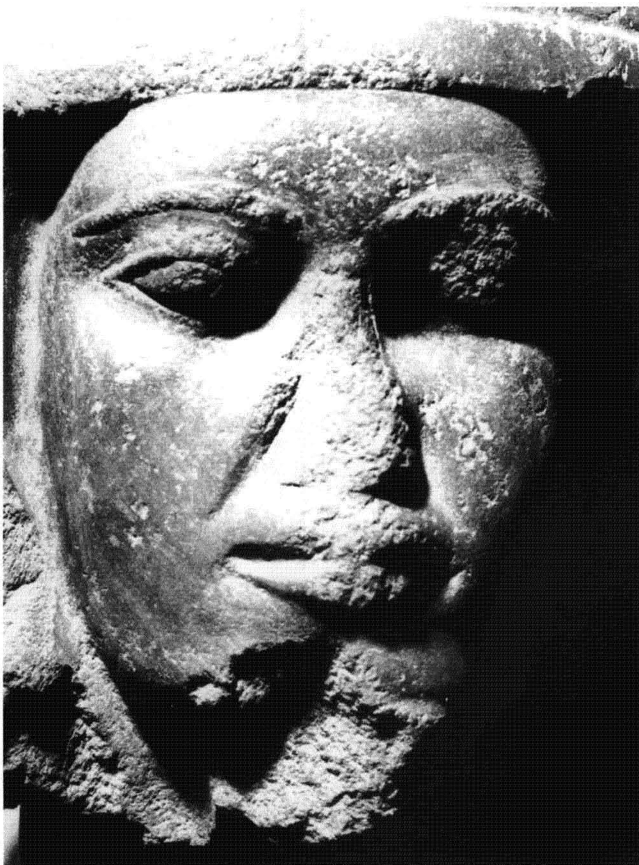
There are two other hard-stone blocks with heads of prisoners in the Cairo Museum which, in workmanship, form, and style relate closely to the aforementioned heads from the Zoser precinct at Saqqara. They probably come from the same studio and surely date to the same period.

The first block (Fig. 25.7) was found in the entrance colonnade of the Step Pyramid enclosure of King Zoser at Saqqara. It shows two heads, presumably of foreign captives, one sullen-looking, the other a type with full beard and moustache, bearing a distinctly bitter, deeply sad expression. Both show a strong affinity to the better preserved of the other two heads from the Zoser complex (Figs. 25.5–25.6); also the band over the forehead restrains the hair in exactly the same way.

The provenance of the other block in the Cairo Museum (Fig. 25.8) is uncertain. It probably was found in the last century at Tanis and brought to Cairo at that time. Its modern provenance, however, does not matter. The three heads at the front edge of the slab, sculpted three-quarters in the round, show the same grim, deeply lined features and have their hair held by a ribbon in the same way as the four heads from



FIG. 25.5. Two heads of prisoners from the Step Pyramid precinct of King Zoser at Saqqara, Dynasty III, 2650 B.C. Cairo no. TR 18/2/26/5. Porter, Moss, Málek, p. 415. Both heads have plastic eyebrows in low relief. The head with the better preserved face is clean-shaven; the heavily damaged head has roughly incised moustache and sideburn contour lines. Recently it has been stated in print that these incised lines indicated that the faces had been reworked in later times, but this is not so. The full-bearded head of Cairo no. JE 49613 (see note to Fig. 25.7 below) has roughly marked moustache and eyebrows, and the contour of its beard has been picked out with a pointed tool but not yet dressed, to me a clear indication that these facial details had not yet been finished or were meant to be modified. That this kind of workmanship represents different stages of execution can be seen in the heads of Cairo no. CG 396 (see note to Fig. 25.8 below). All three of them show these rough contour lines and pick marks in different stages of completion.



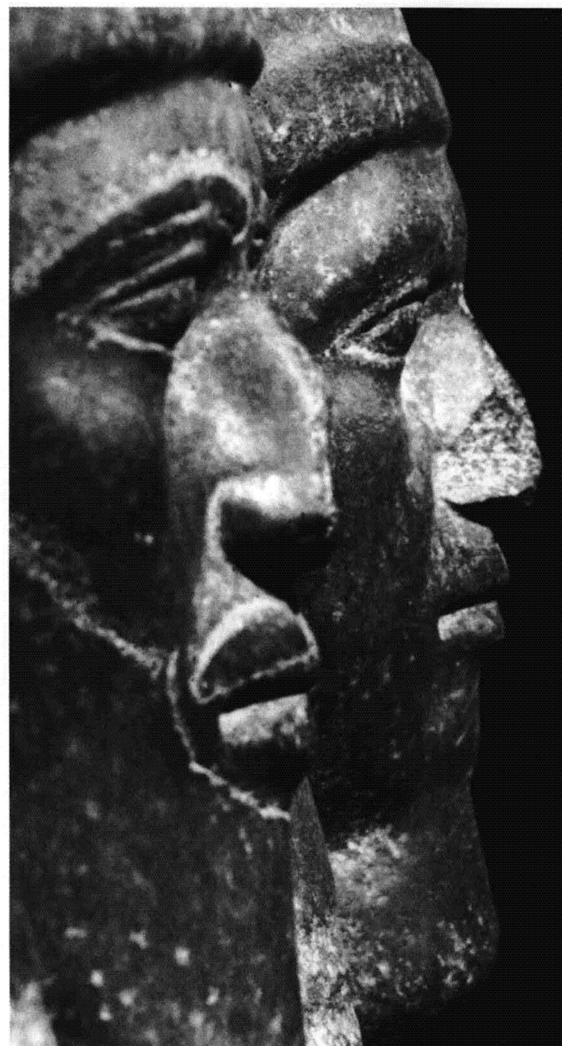




FIG. 25.6. Detail of near face in Fig. 25.5.

FIG. 25.7. Two heads of prisoners from the Step Pyramid precinct of King Zoser at Saqqara, Dynasty III, 2650 B.C. Cairo no. JE 49613. Porter, Moss, Málek, p. 407. The block was recently discussed in an exhibition catalog (Anon. 1978, no. 4), with additional bibliography and reference to an article by D. Wildung (1973, pp. 108–116) which provides a host of material to prisoner representations in Egyptian sculpture in the round.

FIG. 25.8. Three heads of prisoners, probably from Tanis. Dynasty III, 2650 B.C. Cairo no. CG 396. Porter, Moss, IV, p. 26. Doubts have been voiced that this block was found at Tanis. Some have given Damanhour in the Western Delta as provenance; see F. W. von Bissing, 1930, p. 116 note 1. The first to recognize that the block with these three heads belongs with the one illustrated in Fig. 25.7 (Cairo no. JE 49613) was H. G. Evers (1929, pp. 91–93) who brilliantly discussed the problems of the prisoners' heads and substantiated their attribution to Dynasty III.

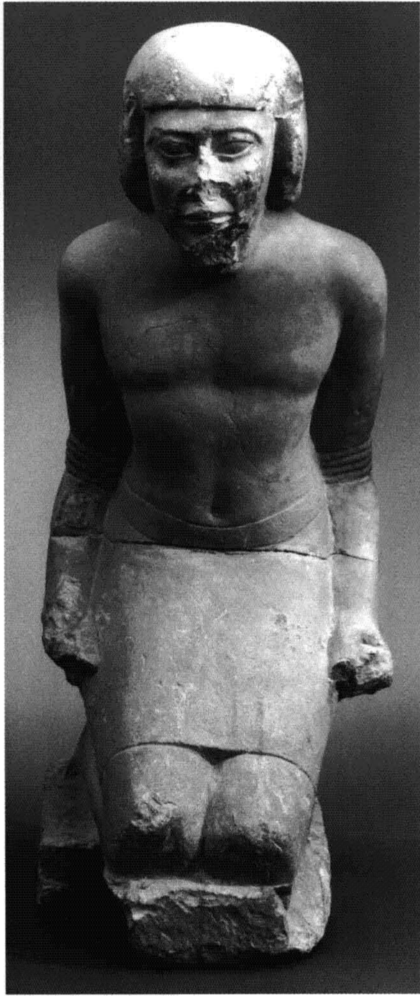




FIG. 25.9. Kneeling prisoner from South Saqqara. Dynasty VI, 2230 B.C. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art no. 47.2. For the alleged provenance from the pyramid complex of King Isesy at South Saqqara see Porter, Moss, Málek, p. 424.

FIG. 25.10. Head of Fig. 25.9.

the Zoser precinct illustrated in Figs. 25.5–25.7. All three are bearded like the man in Fig. 25.7 and bear the same grim features. Style and workmanship are almost identical, and there can no longer be any doubt that this block too originally came from Saqqara, specifically from the funerary complex of King Zoser of Dynasty III.

From later examples of prisoners' heads still imbedded in a piece of architecture it is evident that such slabs showed a row of foreign captives, sometimes under a window through which the king appeared to his subjects or to foreign delegations. This symbolized his conquest and defeat of the peoples outside Egypt, and the same motif appears, on a smaller scale, in royal statuary, at the front of the base as if the king, trampling on the bodies of defeated enemies, were about to step on their heads in his progress.

A different type of prisoner sculpture shows the captive on his knees, cruelly bound, the arms lashed behind him. Head bowed, his

face bears the agony of the defeated; the mature features are deeply lined. A fine statue of this type was acquired some thirty-five years ago by The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Figs. 25.9–25.10). The late William C. Hayes attributed it to Dynasty VI (2290–2155 B.C.) while other Egyptologists thought it might have come from the pyramid complex of Isesy, second to last king of Dynasty V (about 2380–2340 B.C.). It is one of the few examples where head and body belong together and shows the prisoner with bowed head, arms tied together, on his knees. His face is deeply lined, mature and serene. The expression is both pensive and sad, and though it has a beauty of its own, it conveys the feeling of suffering in a captive, a foreigner: a very human document indeed. It establishes for eternity not only the pain felt by the defeated, but also the compassion felt by the one who created the statue.

In recent years, through excavations by Jean-Philippe Lauer and Jean Leclant at the funerary temple of the complex at the pyramid of King Pepy I (2253–2228 B.C.) of Dynasty VI at South Saqqara the number of realistic prisoner representations of the Old Kingdom has greatly increased. Nearly a dozen prisoner heads and several torsos were found, all slightly under life-size, like the prisoner statue in New York which they resemble in many respects. The torsos were modeled with the same attention to anatomical detail, but look very much alike. None had the head in place when found; possibly with one exception, it is impossible to tell which head belonged to each torso, but there is enough evidence to establish the attitude of each sculpture. The prisoners are shown on their knees, with arms tied behind them; the upper portion of the torso is bent forward with the head slightly lowered, as if submitting to an inevitable fate.

There, however, the similarity from figure to figure ends, because their faces, in modeling and expression, show such an amazing variety that a whole range of human emotions can be established from their study alone (Figs. 25.11–25.18). In most of them the wig, or natural hairdo, is left partly unfinished, while the sculpting of the face has been completed down to the last detail (Figs. 25.13 and 25.16). One of them even has an elaborately curled wig and a face which likewise has been minutely perfected as in the indication of the vermilion line bordering the lips (Fig. 25.14). On others both hair and face show an equal degree of completion (Fig. 25.17).

Although most of the heads have enough realistic features to set them apart from the standard, mainly idealizing, human statuary of the period, they nevertheless occasionally reflect a sculptural tradition which the artisan seems unable to escape, for instance in the modeling of the vermilion line just mentioned or the plastic eyebrow in low relief



FIGS. 25.11–25.18. Heads of prisoners from the pyramid complex of King Pepy I at South Saqqara. Dynasty VI, 2230 B.C. These heads are still in the storerooms of the Organization of Egyptian Antiquities at Saqqara which has registered them under its own system as follows (the "PP" number is that of the French excavators).

FIGS. 25.11–25.12. No. FE (FE equals French Expedition) 2 (PP 29)

FIG. 25.13. No. FF 3 (PP 26)





FIG. 25.14. No. FF 5 (PP 19)

FIGS. 25.15–25.16. No. FF 6 (PP 17)







FIG. 25.17. No. FF 8 (PP 23)

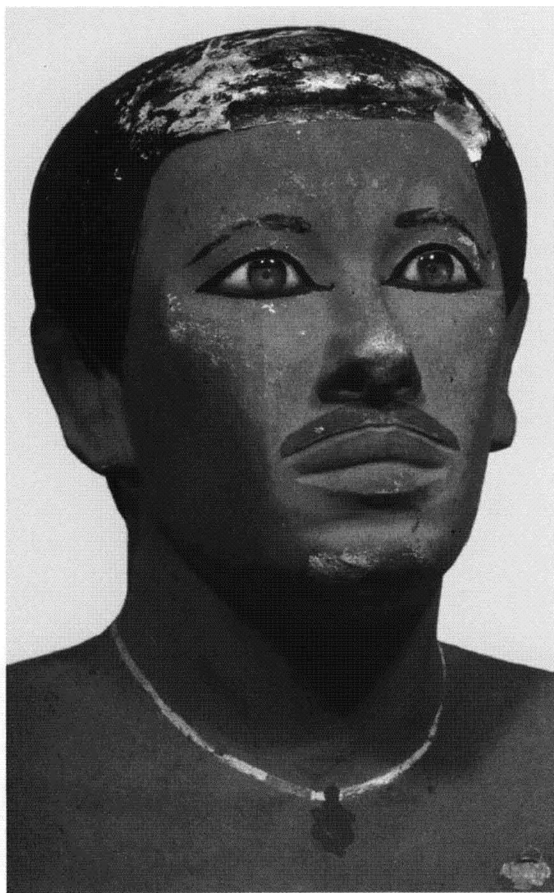


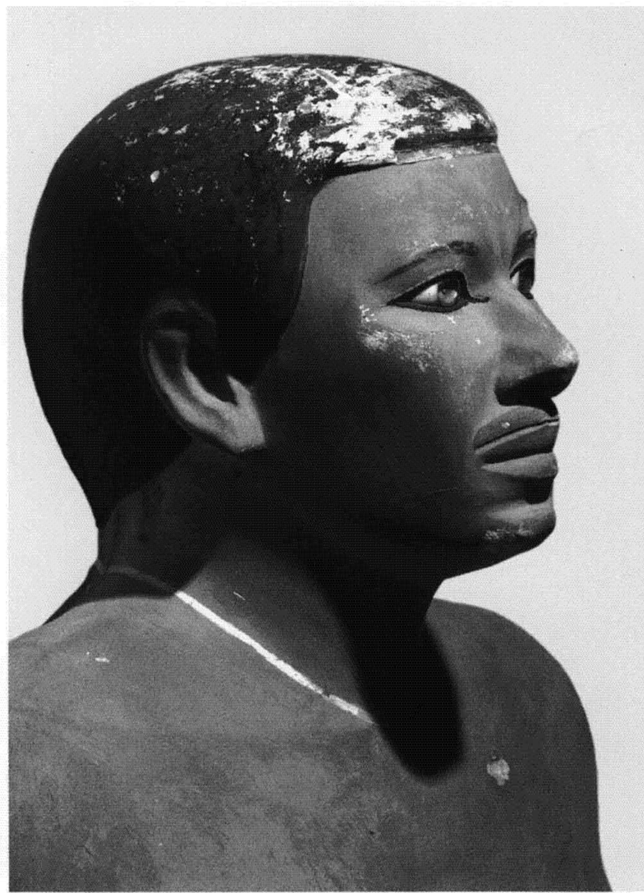
FIG. 25.18. No. FF 104 (PP 60)

To illustrate the heads [in Figs. 25.11–25.18] with new views was made possible through the kindness of Jean Leclant, Ahmed Moussa, and Said el Fikey, who gave us access to ten of the eleven heads from the Pepy I complex for study and photography in July 1980, and facilitated the research in every possible way. Thanks also are due to Joseph Jennemann, my assistant *pro tem* in this venture, who with unfailing willingness helped to carry out our project in those hot summer days.

The eleventh head, which was not accessible to us, appears to be the only one fitting to a fragmentary torso; see Lauer and Leclant, 1969, pp. 58–59, pl. 10 A–B.

The literature on these prisoner sculptures and references to numerous illustrations of heads and torsos through 1974 are listed in Porter, Moss, Málek, p. 422, to which should be added J. Vercoutter (1976: 36–38, fig. 5–6), and J. Leclant (1979), passim. For the vermilion line in Egyptian sculpture, see Bothmer 1980 (1981), p. 77 and note 15 [Chapter 23 of this volume, note 15].





FIGS. 25.19, 25.20. Head of Prince Rahotep. Dynasty IV, 2560 B.C. Cairo no. CG 3. Porter, Moss IV, p. 91.

(Fig. 25.17), while on most heads the brow is rendered in its natural form (Fig. 25.18). Not only that, but about half the heads excavated at South Saqqara show the parting of the hair, usually indicated rather roughly, as not straight and not in the middle (Fig. 25.16).

A special phenomenon in the modeling of these prisoner heads is the way the eyes were made. In all instances they are well modeled, well finished, rather large and distinctly convex; that is to say, slightly popping (Fig. 25.15). Still, in most Old Kingdom statuary the eyeball does not protrude beyond the eyelid rims, and therefore the special attention given to the eyes of these heads must have something to do with the fact that the statues are those of prisoners.

The figures presumably stood on the ground, in the courtyard of Pepy I's pyramid temple. Since they are less than life-size and the heads are slightly bowed, a frontal look at the face, at eye level, would have been possible only if one bent over or kneeled down. To a passer-by the lowered head would offer a view of the hair, and of the upper part of the face, particularly of the eyes, and that may be one of the reasons why they were made so prominent.





The other reason, probably more weighty, is that the aspect of protruding eyes was part of the image of suffering which the bound prisoners were intended to represent. Kneeling, with their arms cruelly tied together, the bodies of the prisoners show tense, bulging muscles but nothing particularly tortured is evident from trunk and limbs. The fact that the men thus bound are suffering physical pain and mental anguish is visible, not so much from the condition of the torsos, as from the expression on the faces, no two alike. They range from glum stupor (Figs. 25.11–25.12) to anguished despair (Fig. 25.18), from tense resignation (Fig. 25.17) to silent suffering (Fig. 25.13) and serenity (Figs. 25.15–25.16), and all have noticeably protruding eyes.

FIG. 25.21 *(facing page)*. Nofer, overseer of scribes. Dynasty IV, 2500 B.C. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts no. 06.1886. Porter, Moss, Málek, p. 74.

FIG. 25.22. Ankh-haf, son of King Snofru and vizier of King Chephren. Dynasty IV, 2500 B.C. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts no. 27.442. Porter, Moss, Málek, p. 196.



FIG. 25.23. Judge Ka-y as scribe. Dynasty V, 2440 B.C. Paris, Musée du Louvre, no. N. 2290. Porter, Moss, Málek, pp. 458–459.

Only the head of the man illustrated in Fig. 25.14 seems to be an exception, because at first it appears as if he were smiling, or at least had a contented face. But studying it more closely, observing the nasolabial furrows and especially the bulge of the well preserved right eye, one becomes aware of the almost comical distortion of the features giving it the somewhat amused expression which was meant to mirror extreme pain. To this day there are people who as a sign of great agony involuntarily look amused.

Realism in mature persons is a stylistic element which can be found throughout the Old Kingdom among the statuary of prominent people. The head of Rahotep from Meydum, at the very beginning of Dynasty IV, is the best among the early, fully preserved examples (Figs. 25.19

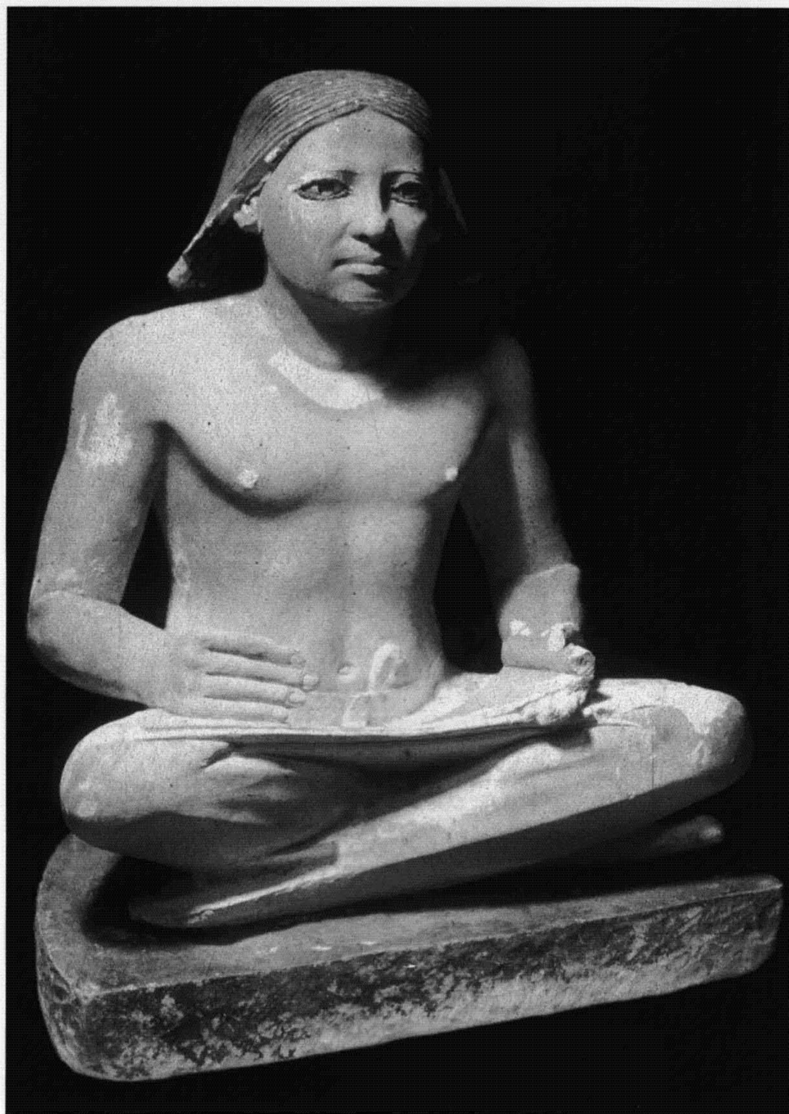


FIG. 25.24. Anonymous scribe. Dynasty V, 2430 B.C. Cairo no. CG 36. Porter, Moss, Málek, pp. 499–500.

and 25.20). It is followed by the reserve head of Nofer (Fig. 25.21) and the bust of Ankh-haf (Fig. 25.22), both from Giza, and two scribe figures of Dynasty V from Saqqara (Figs. 25.23–25.24). In Dynasty VI an outstanding statue group, such as that of the dwarf Seneb, from Giza, shows both idealization in the figure of the lady and realism in the body and face of the man (Fig. 25.25). Furthermore, Dynasty VI also has left us a number of royal sculptures which, in the modeling of facial features, go well beyond the expression of maturity given to the king, a god on earth and the most powerful man in the land. A good example of such realism can be found in a kneeling schist statuette of Pepy I (Fig. 25.26), the very king at whose mortuary temple the large number of prisoner statues mentioned above was discovered.

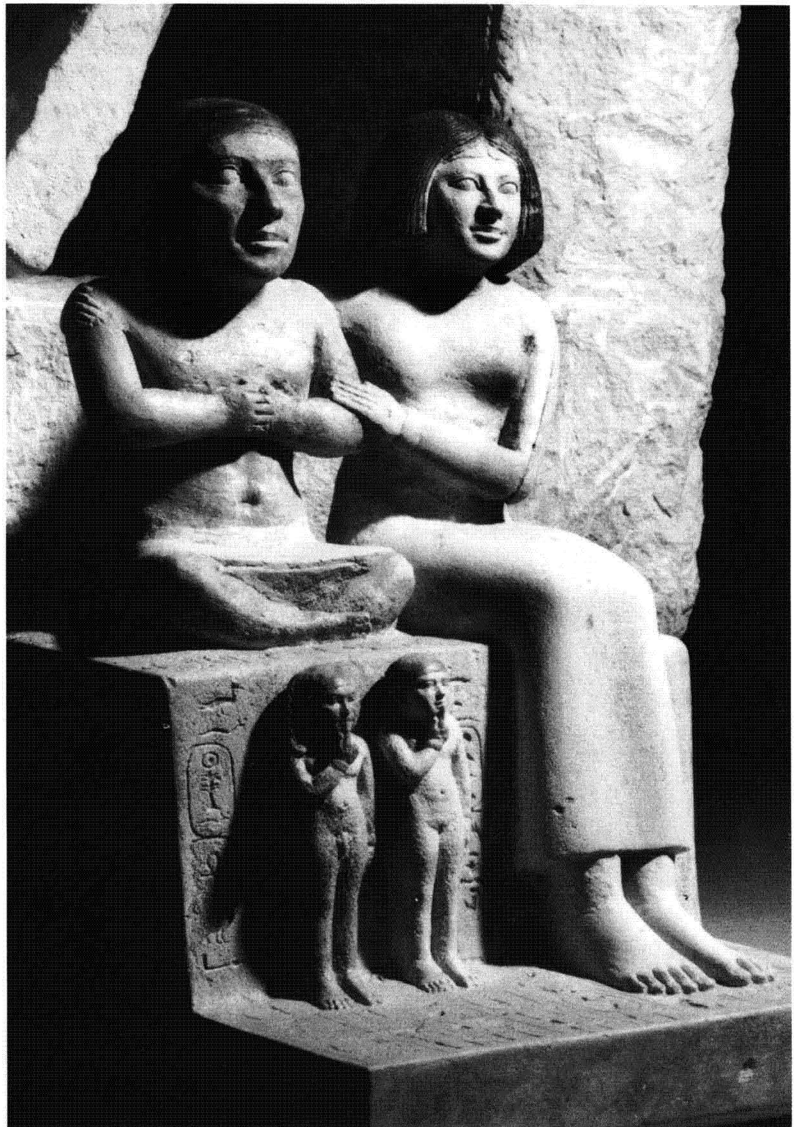


FIG. 25.25. Seneb, director of dwarfs, and his wife Senet-Tefes. Dynasty VI, 2230 B.C. Cairo no. JE 51280. Porter, Moss, Málek, pp. 102–103. Although traditionally attributed to Dynasty VI, the question whether this statue could date from Dynasty IV deserves serious consideration.

Although the prisoner with realistic features is attested at a royal funerary complex only from Dynasty III on, the bound figure of the captive occurs already at the beginning of the Archaic Period, in Dynasty I (about 3100 B.C.). A large-scale example, in hard stone, is in the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania from the archaic sanctuary at Hierakonpolis (Fig. 25.27). The piece was made, and used, as a door socket, and thus every time someone passed through, his feet were meant to tread upon the prisoner and cause him humiliation and pain. Although true anguish was not yet realistically represented at this early age, the idea is well expressed and therefore the prisoner heads at Saqqara of Dynasty III (Figs. 25.5–25.7) are but the development of a concept formed at the very beginning of Egypt's historical period.



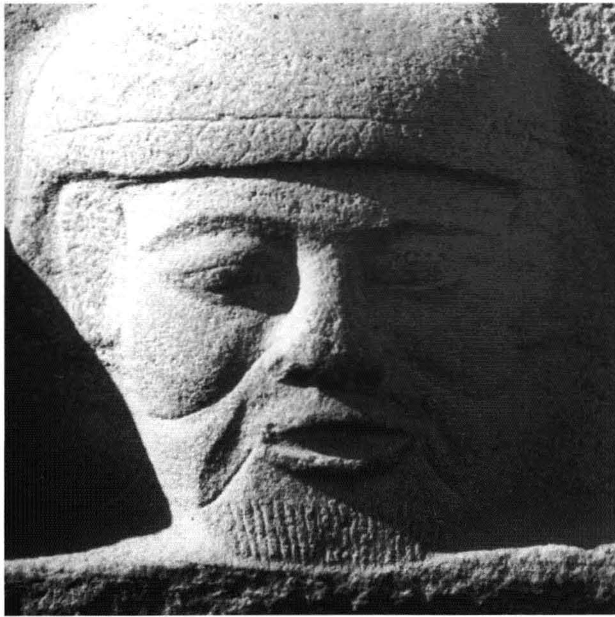
FIG. 25.26 *(right)*. King Pepy I. Dynasty VI, 2268–2228 B.C. The Brooklyn Museum no. 39.121. The head of this small sculpture, often reproduced, measures only 2.8 cm. in height, the face only 2.0 cm. It is, on so minute a scale, one of the most forceful realistic representations of the human face in the Old Kingdom. Although at present unique it may well have been merely one of numerous realistic royal sculptures of the period which apparently were all lost.

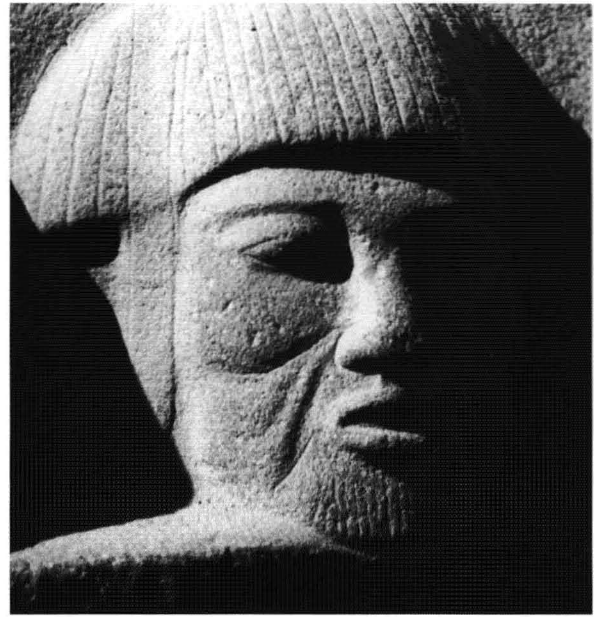
FIG. 25.27 *(above)*. Diorite doorsocket in the form of a captive, from Hierakonpolis. Dynasty I, 3100 B.C. Philadelphia, University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, no. E 3959. Porter, Moss V, p. 196.





FIG. 25.28. Heads of prisoners on a block from Tanis. Dynasty IV, 2540 B.C. Cairo no. JE 60538. Discovery of this huge block in brown quartzite was first made known by Pierre Montet (1935, pp. 4, 6–7; pls. I–V) with excellent illustrations. The Cheops block, found a few feet away, was identified as a pillar from the pyramid temple of Cheops at Giza by H. Ricke (1970, pp. 31–32, fig. 19). In addition to the Cheops pillar, the quartzite block with the prisoners' heads was associated in the monumental gate with a granite architrave and obelisk bearing the names of Ramesses II. Therefore the excavator attributed the block to Ramesses II (Montet 1960, pp. 37–38, no. 27). It should be added, however, that Dr. G. Haeny, the eminent historian of Egyptian architecture, voiced some doubts when I mentioned that to me the block with its prisoners' heads appeared to date from the time of Cheops. To him the "workmanship looked Rameside," *quid est demonstrandum*. For lack of an architectural study of the block and its original employment only the heads have been studied in some detail and, archaeologically, relate better to known sculptures of the early Old Kingdom than to those of any other period.





FIGS. 25.29–25.31 *(facing page and above).* Details of Fig. 25.28.

This concept of the suffering captive, so richly expressed throughout the Old Kingdom, occurs frequently in the art of the Middle and New Kingdoms and, sanctified by tradition, seems to have formed an indispensable element of royal architecture, as a memento of man's fate.

The largest, and in a way most moving and mysterious, document of realism in the faces of prisoners is a huge block, now in the garden of the Cairo Museum (Figs. 25.28–25.31). It measures about three by nine by three feet, weighs many tons and is made of quartzite. It was discovered at Tanis, in the eastern Delta, reused in a monumental gate which had been erected under a king of Dynasty XXII in the ninth century B.C. The gate also contained a granite block of King Cheops of Dynasty IV, which must have been brought to Tanis all the way from Giza, because it belonged undoubtedly to the funerary establishment of the king, east of the Great Pyramid. Therefore, the provenance and date of the huge block with prisoners' heads from Tanis cannot be determined from its findspot and its proper attribution has remained an enigma to this day.

The fact, however, that very close to the monumental gate at Tanis lies the necropolis of five kings of Dynasties XXI–XXII may explain the presence of the block with prisoners' heads because the kings of the early first millennium B.C. may well have been aware that thousands of years earlier the rulers of the Old Kingdom had rows of prisoner heads in hard stone imbedded in their funerary architecture and, lacking well modeled sculptures of their own era, simply took—possibly from



FIG. 25.32. Bernard V. Bothmer is Chairman of the Department of Egyptian and Classical Art at The Brooklyn Museum and Keeper of its Wilbour Collection. He also teaches history of Egyptian art in the graduate school of New York University at the Institute of Fine Arts. He knows Egypt well from numerous visits, especially the Delta sites, but is equally familiar with almost all collections of Egyptian antiquities, public as well as private, in the Eastern and Western world.

Giza—not only blocks with Cheops' name but also a huge slab with the heads of his captives for the embellishment of their own funerary establishment, thus transposing the realism of human suffering from the twenty-seventh to the ninth century B.C.

Note from the Editor of Expedition

This article grew out of a paper on the funerary art of ancient Egypt, read at the symposium on funeral customs at the University Museum on September 26, 1980. Mr. Bothmer's subject, however, covered such a wide range of features that he felt obliged to limit it, for the purpose of publication in this issue of *Expedition*, to a single topic, the problem of realism in Egyptian funerary sculpture of the Old Kingdom. This subject has been frequently discussed by him and others in recent years, in classroom as well as in print; see for instance *ARTnews* (New York), 79 no. 6 (Summer, 1980), pp. 124 ff. and *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* (Leuven), 11 (1980), pp. 79 ff. (Mlle. Nadine Cherpion) (Fig. 25.32).

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